

Closing the Loop

Communication for change at IDRC

IDRC's mission is "Empowerment through Knowledge." As our Corporate Strategy and Program Framework states: "The Centre strives to optimize the creation, adaptation, and ownership of the knowledge that people of developing countries judge to be of the greatest relevance to their own prosperity, security and equity." (*IDRC in a Changing World, Program Directions 2000-2005*, p. 16)

IDRC recognizes, however, that a gap often exists between the creation or acquisition of knowledge and its application to achieve prosperity, security, and equity. Helping to bridge that gap has become a priority. We call it "Closing the Loop."

A definition

While the definition and ideas of closing the loop will evolve as we engage and learn more in this direction, in its broadest application, for IDRC

Closing the Loop is an approach to programing and projects that seeks to ensure the awareness, understanding, and ownership of research outputs by decision-makers at all levels. Its goals are to increase the relevance and utilization of research outputs, thereby enhancing the influence of the researchers, institutions, and work we support.

Effectively Closing the Loop will ultimately lead to changes

- ✓ in thinking (increased knowledge and increased capacity to use that knowledge)
- ✓ in relationships (establishing and strengthening links between researchers/research institutions and decision-makers and their institutions)
- ✓ in decision making and policy making (actions, activities, programs, and policies)

This definition of CTL is useful for a number of reasons:

- It recognizes that decision making occurs at various levels and is carried out by a broad range of decision-makers: from heads of families to program directors in other donor agencies, to government policymakers. Which to target depends on the program's objectives, as well as who the research is most likely to influence and who can, in turn, influence others.
- It recognizes that civil society can play a powerful role in influencing decision-makers.
- It recognizes that "research can inform policies and programs most effectively when there is a three-way process of communication linking researchers, decision-makers, and communities. [...] Better communication can increase the relevance of research to

potential users and improve the chances that research findings will be heard and acted upon” (Porter and Prysor-Jones, 1997).

- It incorporates an element of purpose and impact for CTL activities.
- It allows us to ask questions, the answers to which may provide a clearer conceptual framework within which research activities can be structured and undertaken.

The concept of Closing the Loop carries a clear message that IDRC wants to be seen as strongly pro-active in its commitment to research for development from four perspectives:

- First, IDRC wants to increase the reach of outputs from research it supports, from the implementing organization and local community to policymakers, donors, development institutions, and other stakeholders who are key to building an enabling environment for change. (Outputs include specific technical interventions, institutional innovations, and research approaches and methodologies.) This requires considering, not only what problem needs to be solved, but who is involved in the solution.
- Second, IDRC wants to ensure that the knowledge generated by the research it supports is analyzed, synthesized, and presented in a manner that will influence those who, in one way or another, can influence or take decisions or alter policies and activities that affect the lives of poor families in the developing countries where we work. This includes influencing those who can, in turn, influence decision-makers.
- Third, IDRC wants to increase opportunities for on-the-job capacity-building in the research it supports.
- Fourth, IDRC wants to be able to demonstrate to those who influence or control our funding that we support research that produces useful development results.

Closing the Loop in action

“Probably the most important thing is the extent to which researchers can get their ideas out and have an influence on what society is ready to do or think about.”

(Maureen O’Neil, An Interview with IDRC President Maureen O’Neil, in *IDRC in a Changing World, Program Directions 2000-2005*, p. 10)

Closing the Loop needs to be mainstreamed in program and project design, and strategies should be built in as integral components of projects. It requires action at all stages of the research process to ensure that the end-use of the research is considered from the outset. (See *Making a Difference to Policies and Programs: A guide for Researchers*, by Robert W. Porter and Suzanne Prysor-Jones, July 1997, on which the following is based.):

- In defining the research questions: Choosing what to study and how to talk about the research concerns requires knowing how potential users define the issues. They must also be engaged in defining the research questions.

- In developing the proposal: The decisions and users the researcher wishes to influence must be clear and the research methods appropriate to informing that decision and reaching those users. Strategies should involve potential users of the findings. A research dissemination plan should be included.
- In conducting the research: Involve users in implementing and monitoring the study.
- In communicating results: Systematic dissemination strategies are needed for reaching different audiences of potential users. Materials and tools must be in a style appropriate for the various users. Increase the awareness, understanding, and ownership of research outputs by decision-makers and society in general.
- In assessing effectiveness: Assess the quality of the research and the utility of findings to decision-makers, and generate information to improve future performance.

Other strategies can also be devised to bring the results of current and completed research to a wider range of potential users and decision-makers who were not directly involved in the initial design of particular projects, but who can benefit from the research results because they face similar issues. This requires clearly defining target audiences and appropriately synthesizing, packaging, and presenting information, in a variety of settings and formats. Formats can include:

- summary policy/program briefs in key findings and recommendations;
- personal presentations to decision-makers at various levels;
- policy workshops;
- news releases, articles for newspapers, opinion pieces, radio and television interviews;
- presentations at workshops or symposia;
- research reports for academic or scientific audiences;
- electronic publication and dissemination.

Some success factors

A number of factors can influence the success of closing of loop efforts. Some of the determinants, which are intrinsic to the project and need to be in place, include:

- a) planning for use/success in closing the loop in project proposal and design: targeting users/champions; including a dissemination plan at the outset; bringing users on board at the outset; training/increasing the awareness of targeted users of the value of expected results; getting researchers on board of policy making agenda/activities/forums; obtaining support of established research institutions;
- b) adequate financial and human resources;
- c) the quality of the research and credibility of results: perceived accuracy and objectivity; appropriateness of research design and methods; the relevance/usefulness of research results/technology developed to priority problems and local context; the researchers/research institution's reputation and credibility; the accessibility of the results (i.e., format-specific to audience);
- d) the project's realistic, concrete, useable suggestions/recommendations.

An enabling environment

An enabling environment will also facilitate the transition from research outputs to the realization of a development vision. Although these “frame conditions” lie well beyond the influence of the project’s personnel and activities, they need to be considered in project design and follow-up. They include:

- transparent governance,
- the decision-maker’s interest in the research and need for information,
- a favourable policy environment,
- the user’s commitment to using the research results,
- the existence of links and good communication between researchers/research institutions/the research/NGOs/policymakers/ government officials/government institutions/donor community/etc.,
- the decision-makers’ credibility,
- the existence of individuals or groups who champion the use of the research and desired changes.

Some caveats

- ☐ Research is only one of many sources of information for decision-makers.
- ☐ “Effective dissemination of research findings is a challenging process and requires a strategy to determine who should receive the information, what form the information should take, who should deliver the information, and how to maximize the potential influence the information can have.” (Porter and Prysor-Jones, 1997)
- ☐ “High-quality research – that is, research that meets the scientific criteria of the chosen discipline -- enhances credibility. But high quality does not itself guarantee credibility or use. Other factors – such as whether findings are comprehensible to potential users, relevant to their problems, and timely – may have a more direct bearing on their use.” (Porter and Prysor-Jones, 1997)
- ☐ Policymakers’ resistance to poor quality research cannot be overcome by sophisticated packaging. In spite of ringing endorsements of local perspectives, they will resort in the final analysis to advice from credible sources including, of course, those outside their own country.
- ☐ Informing policy (at all levels) requires commitment and significant investments of time and resources.
- ☐ “Choosing specific communication strategies cannot be reduced to a simple set of rules or procedures. The levels and types of dialogue that are appropriate and feasible will vary according to the research being undertaken, as well as the political environment, the

cultures of the organizations involved, and individual personalities.” (Porter and Pryor-Jones, 1997)

- “ ... to be effective, development research programs must go further than information creation and dissemination; they must actively engage development actors in the adaptation and application.” (Earl, Carden, and Smutylo, 2001)

Conclusions

- “Closing the Loop” is not only an activity, but an approach to research planning, implementation, communication, and evaluation. In future, closing the loop strategies should be integral components of research projects to ensure that the right decision-makers – users – are identified and are involved from the start.
- Other “determinants” that need to be in place to maximize the chances of impact should also identified and, where possible, be incorporated into the project design and addressed through project activities.
- “Closing the loop” should not be seen as an end-point of research, but rather a step that needs to be taken along the research and development continuum.

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